

WASHINGTON—On Thursday, February 7, Congressman Joe Sestak (D-PA), a Member of the House Education and Labor Committee, voted for the College Opportunity and Affordability Act (H.R. 4137). — “A college education is essential today in the global economy, but more and more, the rising cost of a college is putting a college degree further out of reach for America’s students,” said Congressman Sestak. “Additionally, students and families face an overly complex federal student aid application process and a student loan industry that has been mired in conflicts of interest and corrupt lending practices. This legislation today will not only make college more affordable and accessible, but the bill would reform our higher education system so that it operates in the best interests of students and families, while boosting our competitiveness and strengthening America’s future.”

H.R. 4137 reauthorizes the Higher Education Act (HEA) through FY 2012, and includes new provisions to expand student aid, helps to streamline the college financial aid applications process, and restores accountability and integrity to student loan programs, among many changes to the act. Most notably, the legislation increases the maximum Pell grant to \$9,000 per year, from \$5,800, creates a "higher education price index" to help students and their families compare tuition increases at different colleges, and will bars lenders from giving schools financial perks in order to get on a "preferred lender list."

Additionally, Congressman Sestak introduced and the House passed two amendments to H.R. 4137. The first amendment addresses the lack of transparency among colleges, specifically regarding the transfer of academic credit between postsecondary institutions. A student’s inability to transfer credit may result in longer enrollment, more tuition payments, and additional federal financial aid. National data indicates that, on average, transfer graduates take about 10 more credits and 3 more months to complete their baccalaureate degree than non-transfer graduates. It is estimated that loss of credit among transfer students is over \$5.2 billion per year. Congressman Sestak’s amendment encourages states and public institutions of higher education to develop management systems for course equivalency, transfer of credit, and articulation.

“Over 40 percent of students attending a college or university transfer at least once before they complete their undergraduate degree. However, despite increases in student mobility, institutions have not adjusted with substantive changes in the manner in which they oversee and articulate the transfer of college student academic credit,” said Congressman Sestak. “I believe it is time for institutions to develop new strategies to improve gaps in credit transfer agreements and facilitate transparency of credit equivalencies between institutions.”

The second amendment which the Congressman introduced expands physical therapy to the list of “areas of national need” for which graduates of programs in physical therapy can receive loan forgiveness of up to \$10,000 over a five year period.

“According to the American Hospital Association, physical therapists represent the occupation for which the greatest percentage of vacancies exists in our hospitals across our nation, at 11.4%. This is at a time when the demand for physical therapists’ employment is projected to grow 27% within eight years, even as 58% of our hospitals were reporting in 2006 that therapist recruitment is more difficult than the year before,” said Congressman Sestak. “I believe it is imperative we add physical therapists into the ‘areas of national need,’ to ensure the Secretary of Education has direction to provide loan repayment forgiveness to boost the number of graduates of physical therapy programs, who provide critical services to children, adolescents, and Veterans.”

More specifically, H.R. 4137 will include provisions to:

Expand college access and support for students entering college

Increase the maximum authorized Pell grant award from \$5,800 to \$9,000. Under the bill, these grants could be used year round, and would be accessible to part-time students.

Provides a new \$10,000 loan forgiveness program for individuals serving in high-need areas. It provides up to \$2,000 per year for five years for nurses, early childhood educators; foreign language specialists, librarians; teachers; speech language pathologists; national service participants; school counselors; public sector employees; nutrition professionals; medical specialists; and mental health professionals.

Provide grant assistance to graduate students who are studying in areas of national need. The provision gives priority to grants aimed at preparing professors to train teachers in science, technology, math, special education, as well as training for teachers with limited English proficiency.

Reauthorizes Patsy Mink fellowships, which are awarded to students of minority groups to acquire masters or doctorate degrees in academic areas where minorities are under-represented.

Allows legal permanent residents to receive Academic Competitive (AC) and Science and Mathematics Access to Retain Talent (SMART) grants. The measure also amends the SMART grant program to clarify that a student pursuing "eligible courses of study" at institutions where students do not declare majors is still eligible for such grants.

Expands funding for graduate student programs at Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic Serving Institutions, and other minority serving institutions.

Strengthens the TRIO and GEAR UP college readiness and support programs for low-income and first-generation students.

Increases College Aid Support for Veterans and Military Families

Creates a new scholarship program for active duty military personnel and family members, including children and spouses of active duty military service members or veterans.

Establishes support centers to help veterans succeed in college and graduate.
Requires colleges and universities to treat students returning from military service as continuously enrolled students, and allows a family's nursing home expenses to be calculated when deciding how much a student should receive in student loan aid.

Monitor college price increases and provide students and their families with helpful information

Ensures states maintain higher education funding and provides incentives, such as additional need-based aid, to encourage colleges to hold down price increases.

Requires the Education Department to create "higher education price increase watch lists" on the department Web site that report the full price of tuition and fees, as well as the cost of room and board for students living on campus.

Holds colleges and universities accountable for their tuition hikes.

Restore integrity and accountability to the student loan programs

Requires institutions and lenders to adopt strict codes of conduct, incorporating provisions of the Sunshine Act (H.R. 890). This includes barring post-secondary education institutions, officers, and employees from receiving any gift from a private lender in exchange for any advantage in its loan activities. It will also bar lenders from sharing profits from their loan activities with higher education institutions in exchange for an advantage to the lender in its loan activities. This prohibition includes gifts to postsecondary education institutions or their employees.

Provides students with fair and full information about their borrowing options when taking out and repaying student loans, including the terms and conditions of both federal and private student loans; and promotes financial literacy and education for students and parents.

Protects students from aggressive marketing practices by lenders.

Simplify the federal student aid application process

Streamlines the Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA) process, and creates an easy-to-navigate two-page FAFSA-EZ form for low-income families.

Provides families with extra time to plan for their college expenses.

Encourages the Department of Education to coordinate with the Internal Revenue Service to use information that the government already has.

Ensure equal college opportunities for students with disabilities

Establishes a national center to provide support services and best practices for colleges, students with disabilities, and their families.

Helps colleges recruit, retain, and graduate students with disabilities and improves education materials and facilities.

Expands eligibility for Pell Grant scholarships and other need-based aid for students with intellectual disabilities.

Improve Teacher Recruitment and Quality

Reauthorizes the Teach For America program, which recruits and trains recent college graduates seeking to enter into the teaching profession.

Provides for newly created state taskforces to create comprehensive state-wide early childhood education systems.

Creates "Centers of Excellence" to provide grants to historically black colleges and universities and other minority serving institutions to improve teacher quality and preparation.

Requires the National Academy of Sciences to conduct a study to develop best practices in teacher education.

Boost campus safety

Includes new campus safety initiatives, including a program to provide grants to colleges and universities to implement state-of-the-art emergency systems and procedures

Creates a National Center for Campus Safety at the Department of Justice

Establishes a disaster relief loan program to help schools recover and rebuild in the event of a disaster.

Strengthen our workforce and our competitiveness

Changes the Byrd Scholarship program to focus on encouraging students to earn degrees in math and science. A new Math and Science Scholarship Fund would provide aid to students who commit to five consecutive years of service in a math or science field after graduation, while a new Math and Science Incentive Program would provide loan forgiveness of up to \$5,000 of accumulated interest if a student agrees to work for five consecutive years in a math or science field.

Improves teacher training and development programs and focuses on recruiting teachers into high demand science and technology fields.

Encourages students to enter vital public service jobs by authorizing up to \$10,000 in loan forgiveness for public defenders, prosecutors, firefighters, military service members, first responders, law enforcement officers, educators, nurses, and others serving the public interest.

Encourage colleges to adopt sustainable and energy-efficient practices

Creates a grant program to help colleges and universities design and implement sustainable practices.

Convenes the first-ever higher education summit on sustainability to examine how to implement

energy efficient and sustainable practices at institutions of higher education.

Born and raised in Delaware County, former 3-star Admiral Joe Sestak served in the Navy for 31 years and now serves as the Representative from the 7th District of Pennsylvania. He led a series of operational commands at sea, including Commander of an aircraft carrier battle group of 30 U.S. and allied ships with over 15,000 sailors and 100 aircraft that conducted operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. After 9/11, Joe was the first Director of "Deep Blue," the Navy's anti-terrorism unit that established strategic and operations policies for the "Global War on Terrorism." He served as President Clinton's Director for Defense Policy at the National Security Council in the White House, and holds a Ph.D. in Political Economy and Government from Harvard University. According to the office of the House Historian, Joe is the highest-ranking former military officer ever elected to the U.S. Congress.